SPEECH OF
HON. CHARLES E. HUGHES,
AT THE
LINCOLN DINNER OF THE REPUBLICAN CLUB,
AT THE
WALDORF-ASTORIA, NEW YORK,
FEBRUARY 12, 1908.

Governor Hughes: Mr. President, Gentlemen of the Republican Club and Ladies: The exigencies of the gubernatorial office have not given me opportunity to prepare any address which would be worthy of the traditions of this anniversary, and I appear before you without any set speech. I am very glad, indeed, of the opportunity of welcoming to the State of New York the Governor of our sister State of Kentucky, and I envy you the pleasure that you will have in listening to those who will adequately present the memories of this occasion. But, my friends, from a boy I have been full of Lincoln. There is no day in the year that is so eloquent to me as the day in which we commemorate his birth. It is true that on that day of all days, when we celebrate the Declaration of Independence, the American heart is warm with the sentiments of liberty and of free opportunity and of party recognition of equality. It is also true that on the day when we celebrate the birth of the Father of his Country, we render loyal

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tribute to the distinguished services of the man who, against odds which we little appreciate, battled for the independence which was so nobly declared; and we all feel richer in our manhood because we were introduced to the family of nations by one who so worthily represented the best that humanity has offered. But there is one man who presents to the American people above all others in his many sided greatness the type representative of those qualities which distinguish American character, and make possible the maintenance of our national strength, and, in Abraham Lincoln we recognize, not simply one who gave his life for his country and rendered the most important service that any man could render in the preservation of the Union, but one who seemed to have centered in himself those many attributes which we recognize as the sources of our national power. He is, par excellence, the true American, Abraham Lincoln.

I wish in our colleges, and wherever young men are trained, particularly for political life, that there could be a course in Lincoln. I wish our young men could be taken through the long efforts of his career, I wish they could become more intimately acquainted with the addresses that he delivered, I wish that they could get in closer touch with that remarkable personality and then they would never find it possible to take a low or sordid view of American opportunity.

Abraham Lincoln was an acute man, but we erect no monuments to shrewdness. We have no memorials by which we desire to perpetuate the records of American smartness. Skill in manipulation, acuteness in dealing for selfish purposes, may win their temporary victories, but the acuteness that the American people admire is that acuteness which is devoted to the solution of problems

affecting their prosperity and directly related to their interests, and which is employed unselfishly and for the benefit of the people, apart from any individual interest.

I have long been a student of Lincoln. I have marvelled at the ability which he displayed. There has been no greater exponent of that shrewdness of intellect which so pre-eminently characterizes the American, but Abraham Lincoln devoted all his talents and his extraordinary perspicacity to the welfare of the people. He was a man of principle. He was a man, all of whose acts were founded upon a recognition of the fundamental principles which underlie our Republic. Said he, on one occasion, "I have no sentiments except those which I have derived from a study of the Declaration of Independence." He was profoundly an apostle of liberty. I have said that he was a man of principle. Rarely has the doctrine of the relation of the Nation to the States, and of government to the individual, been more lucidly expounded than he expounded it in those sentences which probably are familiar to you all. He said: "The nation must control whatever concerns the nation. The States, or any minor political communities, must control whatever exclusively concerns them. The individual shall control whatever exclusively concerns him. That is real popular sovereignty."

He was an expert logician. He brought to bear upon his opponents the batteries of remorseless logic. He had a profound confidence in the reasoning judgment of the American people. He disdained all efforts to capture the populace by other means.

There is nothing more illuminating than his conduct of that grand campaign against Douglas in 1858. He developed his line of attack in a question. He brought to bear upon his opponent an

extraordinary ability of analysis. He eviscerated the subject of discussion and he presented the whole matter that was then before the great American Nation in its bare bones, in a perfectly cool and logical consideration; and, while he lost the campaign for the senatorship, he made himself the apostle of thinking America in its opposition to the extension of slavery. He had one foundation principle, and that was this: "Slavery," he said, "is wrong. It may be recognized where it constitutionally exists, but shall it be extended?" And to every proposition that was presented by his skillful and adroit opponent he presented not abuse, not any appeal to the emotions of the multitude, but cogent reasoning from which none could escape, and, while he lost the senatorship, he appeared before the American people as representing their ideal of straightforward, honest representation of the truth applicable to their crisis, and received the highest honor within their gift.

There never has been an illustration, I venture to say, within the memory of man, where intellect has exerted so potent a magnetism, and where loyalty has been commended simply because reason exerted its sway. I love to dwell upon these historic events. Any American who has failed to take advantage of their study has lost largely his opportunity.

Whenever you are tempted to think in a discouraging manner of the future of the American Republic, you should read the annals of those times when the Union itself was in the balance, and you should realize how inevitably the American public responds to the demands of reason and how necessarily anything that cannot stand against honest judgment must fail in this enlightened Republic.

Lincoln was a humble man, unpretentious and of lowly birth. He was without affectation. He was the most democratic of men. No one that has ever lived among us has been so much a brother to every man, however lowly born or unfortunately circumstanced. His was not the early training of those who like many of our distinguished men had the advantages afforded by parentage with noble traditions, although in poor circumstances, with schooling and environment which would stimulate the loftiest of aspirations. He sprung from conditions which would seem to stifle ambition. He simply was a man,—a man born,—a great American; superior to all the disadvantages which surrounded his birth and early training, and there is no man who walks in any station of life in any part of the country who cannot call Lincoln his brother, his friend, a man of like passions and like experiences with himself.

We recognize some men for the services that they have rendered. They have deserved well of their country. We recognize Lincoln for his service. No one has deserved better of his country. He rendered a service which cannot be eulogized in too extravagant terms; but we forget anything that Lincoln ever did or anything that Lincoln ever said in the recognition of the great manhood that was his, which transcended anything he did because of what he was.

I have said that he was a man of principle; and so he was. But he was a progressive man; he was sensitive to the demands of his day. Three or or four years—three years, I believe it was, after the outbreak of the war he said, "I have not controlled events; I confess events have controlled me. After three years we find ourselves in a situation which neither party and no man devised or expected." He was a man who met each demand

as it arose. To the radicals he was too conservative; to the conservatives he was too radical. Few in the community praised him during his life. Probably no man in the whole history of the Republic was ever so severely criticised and so mercilessly lampooned in the dark days of 1864, after he had, through years of trouble, sustained a burden which would have broken down an ordinary man. He said in August of that year that it seemed there were no friends, and he looked forward to the next election as almost certain to go against the party which he represented.

Without sacrilege I may say he was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." And frequently alone, without the sustaining encouragement of even those who were close to him in his official family, he endeavored to exercise that judgment which history commends and that extraordinary talent for analyzing difficult situations which are the marvels of our later day.

My friends, Lincoln represents what the American Republic is capable of and, in one personality, typifies what we have accomplished and of what we can reasonably hope.

He was a humane man, a man of emotion which he never allowed to control his reason; a man of sentiment, of deep feeling. He was a lowly man who never asserted himself as superior to his fellows, but he could rise in the dignity of his manhood to a majesty that has seldom been equalled by any ruler of any people under any form of government. When Lee sent to Grant and suggested that there might be some talk with regard to the disposition that might be made of public affairs in the interest of peace, and Grant forwarded the communication or the substance of it to the President, the President, without a moment's hesitation, or without consultation with

any one, said, in effect, "You shall confine your communications with General Lee to the matter of capitulation or to minor or military subjects. You shall not discuss with him any political affairs. The President reserves to himself the control of those questions and will not submit them to any military convention."

It was not an assertion of any superiority which he felt above his brother man. It was simply the realization of the dignity of his office and its responsibility in a supreme crisis, and the willingness to assume that responsibility before the American people with that innate confidence of which, with his supreme intellect, he could never be deprived.

My friends, we see in Lincoln patience, the reasoning faculty, humanity, the democratic sentiment, patient consideration, all combined, and we may well learn from him the lessons which at every hour of our history we should well study.

There may be those who look with uncertainty upon our future, who feel oppressed by the problems of the day. I am not one of them.

"Why," said Lincoln, "should we not have patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the American people?"

Why not, indeed? Who are the American people? They are the most intelligent people organized into any civil society on the face of this broad earth. They have abundant opportunities for education. They are keen and alert. They are those whom you meet in every walk of life. Their common sense is of general recognition among all the peoples of the world. Why not have patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the American people? If we could only feel, as Lincoln felt, and derive our political sentiments from a study of the principles of the Declaration of Independence and

proceed, as Lincoln did, with remorseless logic to the consideration of the demands of every exigency, there can be no question but what each problem will be solved, and that every decade of American history will witness a further advance, and that the prosperity of the future will far transcend anything that we have realized in the past.

Undoubtedly abuses exist; undoubtedly abuses must be cured. If there is any man who thinks, or any set of men who think, that by any astuteness they may stand in the way of progress and may prevent the correction of evils that exist, let them beware. They will find themselves impotent. Progress will take no account of them. The American people will advance step by step surely and inevitably to a realization of their ideal, and nothing whatever will stand in the way, in the course of time, of that equality of opportunity and of equal rights before the law which the Declaration of Independence announced and which the Constitution was intended to conserve.

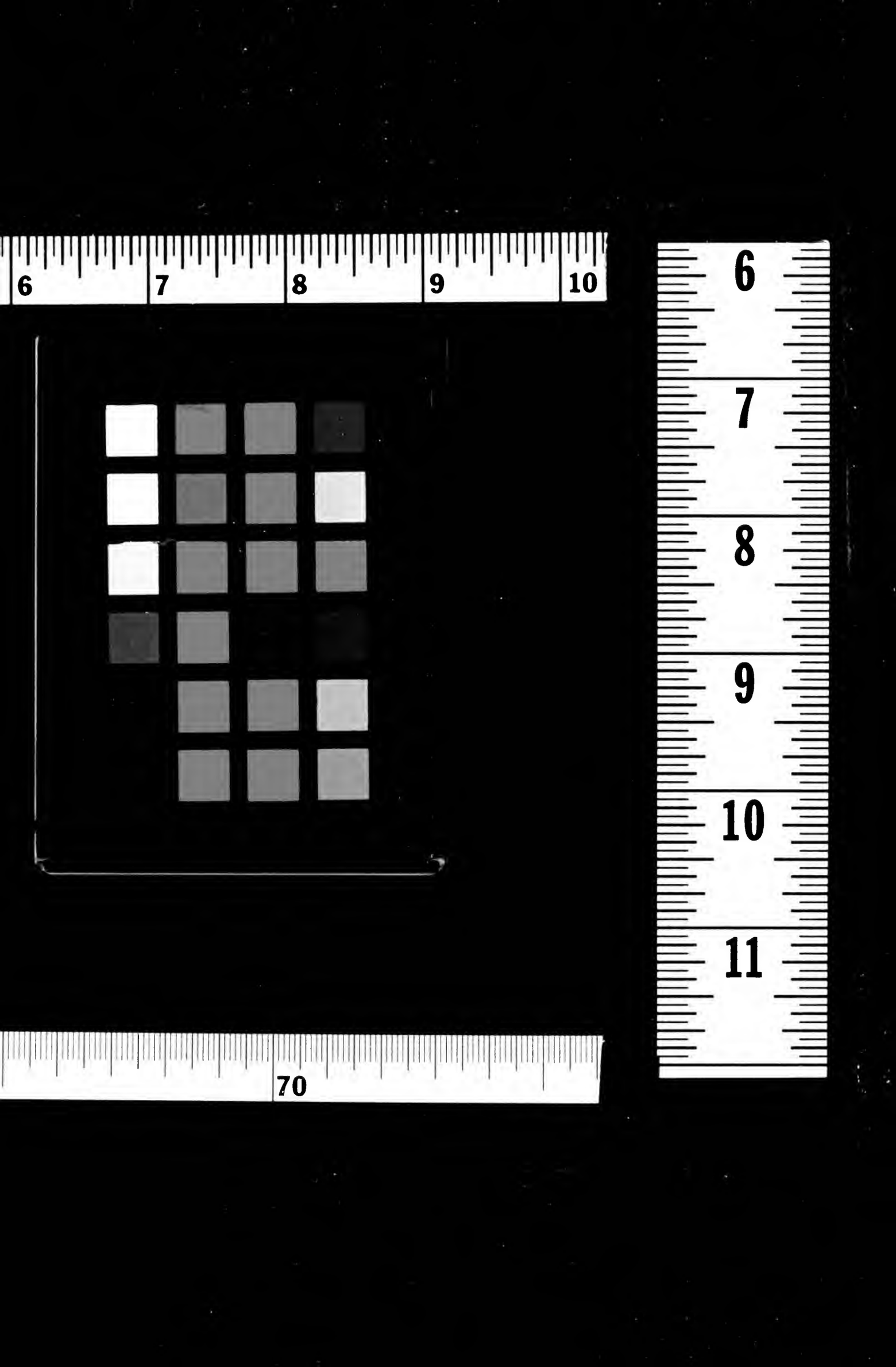
What we need to-day is a definition of evils. What we need to-day is a delimiting of abuses, and let the whole power and strength of the Republic, as represented by those who are naturally its leaders, be devoted to the careful and calm consideration of remedies in order that we may save our prosperity and, at the same time, render every condition which threatens us impotent and powerless, because the will of the people in the interest of the people, the deliberate expression of the popular judgment, must in this country at all times be supreme.

There is plenty of coal on board; every man is at his post; steam is up, and the only question is as to the direction and to avoid the sand-bars and the shoals; it is a question of the selection of the

right course. I believe most thoroughly in the judgment of the American people. Every man in this country worthy of his citizenship desires to work. He desires to get a fair opportunity to show what is in him. He desires to have the advantages which from boyhood he has been taught that this American Republic affords. He desires to have hurdles and obstacles which may have been put in his way by special partiality or by a perversion of government removed. He desires to have no disadvantage created by any ill-considered interference with government relations. But, on the other hand, he intends to have the fullest advantage and opportunity for the exercise of his individual power, with recognition of the equal right of every other man to the exercise of his individual power; so that all may be prosperous and all may succeed; and all that we need is to put a stop to those things which are inimical to our common advantage, and insist upon our common rights, and reason together in regard to what is fair and what is just, and accomplish things with full ascertainment of the facts because they are right, and because the people, in their deliberate judgment, demand that they should be accomplished.

We are all fortunate that we have a Lincoln. What would the country be if we were all a lot of sordid money grabbers with nothing to point to but the particular sharpness of A, or the special success in some petty manipulation of B? What a grand thing it is that we have the inheritance of the memory of a man who had everything which we could aspire to in intellectual attainment; who was endowed with a strength of moral purpose; who was perfectly sincere in the interest of the people, and who gave his life work and eventually his life itself in order that our Union with its opportunities might survive.

I am proud, my friends, to have had an opportunity to study Lincoln's life. If any of you have failed to take advantage of that opportunity, do not let another year go by without making a thorough study of that career. It is an epitome of Americanism. It will realize all that you have dreamed of and all that you can possibly imagine. It is simply the representation of a man upon whose brow God had written the line of superiority, who never arrogated it to himself except in his great function of discharging the highest office of government. Defeated again and again, failing to realize the ambition that was next to him—again and again he rose by sheer force of intellect and character until he came to the point where a Nation's burden was put upon him, and he carried it so nobly that forever he will be to us a Nation's representative of the typical American.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